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BY FREDDY CUEVAS

The sister of a U.S. Roman Catholic priest who disappeared while traveling with a group of leftist guerrillas said Friday that "American forces" may have been involved.

The Rev. James Francis Carney was with a rebel band fleeing government troops last September, according to captured rebels and the Honduran army.

The army initially reported Carney died of exhaustion in a mountainous area near the Nicaraguan border, but later the army said it had no proof the priest had died.

"North American forces may have been involved in the capture, torture and death of our brother," Eileen Carney Connolly, Carney's sister, told a news conference Friday.

Mrs. Connolly and other family members said they had reason to believe Carney, from St. Louis, Mo., was held prisoner at El Aguacate, a Honduran military base built with U.S. aid. The base is located 108 miles northeast of the capital.

Neither Mrs. Connolly nor the other family members offered substantiation for their statements.

They indicated they still did not know whether Carney was alive or dead.

"If he is dead, we want the Honduran authorities to bring us the body," said Eileen Connolly's husband, Joseph.

With the Connollys was Maureen Carney of Los Angeles, another sister of the priest.

The family members said they would stay in Honduras until they learned the priest's fate. They said they were trying to arrange meetings with U.S. Ambassador John Negroponte; Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martinez, chief of the Honduran armed forces, and officials of the CIA.

Carney, 58, had served as a priest in Honduras from 1964 until 1979, when the military government then in power expelled him for working with peasant organizations. He served in Nicaragua after his expulsion.

Rebel deserters said Carney was with a guerrilla band being pursued by government troops last September. The deserters said Carney was lagging behind the and was very weak when they last saw him.

The Honduran army said the band of about 100 guerrillas had infiltrated Honduras from Nicaragua, the leftist-controlled country to the south.